

The Pull of Domesticity in an Era of Anxiety

The draw of nostalgic domesticity is not surprising. We're living in scary times. The economy has been in the toilet for several years now, with little sign of rebound. Our neighbors are laid off, our friends have lost their health insurance, even the wealthy are no longer safe. The environment's a mess—greenhouse gas emissions are spiraling upward and upward, temperatures are spiking, drought billows across the country, politicians don't seem to care. The food system no longer seems safe, what with all the YouTube videos of bloated, antibiotic-pumped chickens stewing in salmonella-streaked filth, the recalls of *E. coli*-poisoned spinach, the stories of factory farms spewing sludge into our waterways.

People are on edge. The month I began working on this chapter, there was a freaky, once-a-century East Coast earthquake followed closely by a rare northeastern hurricane followed by disastrous flooding. In a sunnier era, people might have shrugged this off as a bizarre coincidence. Instead, even my most rational and even-tempered friends and acquaintances muttered darkly about apocalypse and global warming and the collapse of civilization. A week after the hurricane, tornadoes spun through central North Carolina, setting off sirens at the fire station down the street from my house. "Take shelter now. Take shelter now," intoned a recorded voice.

Well, we're taking shelter. We're learning to knit. We're embracing slow food. We're blogging about renovating our cozy, downsized cottages. We're fantasizing about ditching the corporate world to run a Vermont

goat farm. We're reading books like *How to Sew a Button: And Other Nifty Things Your Grandmother Knew* and *The Prairie Girl's Guide to Life and Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*.

This isn't, of course, the first time home and hearth have been put on such a pedestal—the 1950s brought us the Happy Housewife, while the 1980s served up a minor flurry of media stories about “nesting” and “cocooning” among professional women.

But this current domesticity-mania is unique in that it signals a profound social change among educated, progressive Americans. It's part of a shift away from corporate culture and toward a more eco-conscious, family-centric, DIY lifestyle, a shift that has potential to change the American cultural and political landscape. Part of this change is driven by economic necessity—the current recession, the worst since the Great Depression, has made high-flying consumerist lifestyles unfeasible. But it is also driven by a genuine feeling of disgust with the status quo, a sense that the American dream has turned out to be a big fat toxin-laden, environment-destroying nightmare. The government can't be trusted, corporations can't be trusted, even some of our most basic communal services like hospitals and public schools are under suspicion. Meaningful and lucrative careers, once the brass ring for ambitious young people, are preposterously hard to find these days. And, once found, they tend to come with a whole slew of thorny issues, many of them affecting women disproportionately—expectations of sixty-hour workweeks, lack of maternity leave, massive “mom penalties” on salary.

In this culture of anxiety, it's no wonder so many young people are looking to domesticity in search of a simpler, more sustainable, more meaningful way of life.

New Domesticity is the re-embrace of home and hearth by those who have the means to reject these things. It's the MBA who quits her corporate gig to downsize to a solar-powered renovated barn. It's the twentysomething New Yorker who spends her evenings blogging about her latest baking project rather than hitting the clubs. It's the young mom who, after her too-short maternity leave, decides to try to make extra money selling her knitting on Etsy rather than go back to work. It's the suburban dad turned neo-homesteader, raising chickens in his backyard and trying to grow all his family's veggies. New Domesticity is the embrace of the domestic in the service of environmentalism, DIY culture, personal

fulfillment. Though it may resemble your grandmother's homemaking, it's not—this is something new, different, perhaps even revolutionary.

THE STRANGE PULL OF DOMESTICITY

I first started thinking about this book when I wrote a newspaper story profiling several young, educated women who canned jam. Canning jam had always struck me as a fun, nostalgic hobby, but for these women it was part of something much larger. They spoke of self-sufficiency, of rescuing “lost” domestic arts, of sustainable lifestyles, of reclaiming the concept of “homemaker.”

The idea resonated with me, rather unexpectedly. I was twenty-seven years old, recently engaged, and beginning to think hard about questions of work, family, and what constitutes a meaningful life. At the time, I was living in a shoe-box-sized Chapel Hill bungalow with a claustrophobic, dishwasher-less kitchen. I traveled several months out of the year for work, rarely bothering to unpack my toiletry kit. My diet consisted largely of Trader Joe's tortillas and melted cheddar, eaten by the glow of my laptop. I often worked until two or three A.M. and fell asleep with my fingers on the keyboard.

There was something undeniably appealing about the idea of a simpler, more home-centric life, a life made to look especially alluring on the thousands of food-, home-, and domesticity-related blogs multiplying rabbitlike across the Internet. And I was noticing that many of my friends and acquaintances suddenly had similar feelings. The cultural winds seemed to be shifting.

When I was in college in the early 2000s, there was a sense that we were the future masters of the universe, sprinting full tilt into a future of eighty-hour workweeks and corner offices. My peers paraded off to I-banking interviews dressed in pinstriped skirt suits, flew to Silicon Valley giddy with the prospect of hitching their wagon to a rocketing start-up, or went to law school, where they were lavishly feted by corporate firms hoping to snag them for associate positions after graduation.

But by a few years later, the entire landscape had shifted beneath us. The economy headed into the gutter, many of our industries (in my case, newspapers) were breathing their last gasps, people were thinking

harder about what kinds of jobs were moral and fulfilling—suddenly, working at, say, an investment bank held about as much appeal as being a census taker for Satan. There was a rising sense, fueled by the media, that careerism was on the downslide. Economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett was on the airwaves talking about the infertility epidemic and the impossibility of combining work and family life, warning young women to reconsider their freewheeling nonmonogamous twenties. *New York Times* writer Lisa Belkin's infamous "The Opt-Out Revolution" story—in which she interviewed several thirtysomething Princeton grads who had shucked off high-powered careers to stay at home with their children—was spawning endless discussions about whether work was really all that meaningful after all.

At this point, women my age—the oldest end of Generation Y—were beginning to lead the way into marriage and parenthood, and were squinting hard at the road map our baby boomer mothers had left behind. We women had been weaned on "You can have it all," but, having watched our mothers struggle, we were wary. We'd grown up in a culture where careers defined who you were, but all of a sudden careers were harder to come by, and we were increasingly skeptical of their powers to fulfill us.

So New Domesticity seemed to fill a hole many of us were feeling. For some of my friends, New Domesticity was simply about knitting to relax after a long day in the office. For others, it was about growing their own vegetables in the name of sustainable living. For still others, it was about reevaluating long-held notions about what constituted success—maybe being with family was more important than earning that corner office. It wasn't just women feeling this way. Gen Y men, though acculturated to value money and power, were becoming increasingly interested in work-life balance, and increasingly disinterested in "working for the Man." The guys of my generation were suddenly talking about opening artisan food trucks, or starting a backyard farm, or moving into shared housing in order to afford to focus on what really mattered—their band, their relationship, their art, their cooking projects. Some called this slackerdom or Peter Pan syndrome, but I wondered if it wasn't about something more.

Given that most of us were raised by working baby boomer parents—lawyers, social workers, computer programmers—who had happily rejected traditional domestic work, this was an interesting turn of events.

And it got me thinking—where did this New Domesticity come from?

Why did it have such a pull for educated, ambitious young people like my friends and me? What were its potential implications?

As I started to research this New Domesticity—talking to ordinary women and men; looking at data; interviewing sociologists, historians, and economists; hanging out at urban homesteads; attending crafting conferences—I began to see that the phenomenon was deeply rooted in the sweeping social, environmental, and economic factors that have transformed America from the ego-drunk boomtown of the 1990s to the rather humbled, nervous nation of today.

Though these factors are complex and intertwined, several stood out dramatically:

1. A rising sense of distrust toward government, corporations, and the food system
2. Concern for the environment
3. The gloomy economy
4. Discontent with contemporary work culture
5. The draw of hands-on work in a technology-driven world
6. An increasingly intensive standard of parenting

By looking more closely at these factors, I began to realize that New Domesticity was about far more than hobbies or a love for retro fashion. It was really about the ways America had changed over the past decade. And its implications were broad—not just for women, but for men, families, society.

Let's look at these factors in a bit more depth, with an eye to how they might be affecting women in unique, distinct ways.

A GROWING SENSE OF DISTRUST IS SPURRING DOMESTIC DIY-ISM

The only way to know what's in your food is to make it yourself.

—Cat, 26, Pennsylvania

I really want to explore homeschooling. At public school, I'd worry about what my son was eating at lunch and the advertising at schools and the pop in vending machines and the cleaning solutions.

—Courtney, 31, Iowa City

Widespread feelings of disgust and distrust toward government, business, and institutions are changing domestic life. As people lose faith in communal solutions for social, economic, and environmental problems, there's been a dramatic shift toward an ethos of family-based self-reliance, an ethos that's quickly moving from the fringes and into the mainstream.

A growing distrust of the industrial food system has led to a revolution of DIY food production. Across America, people are growing their own vegetables, raising the much-discussed backyard chickens, even grinding their own flour for bread. As Cat, the twenty-six-year-old quoted earlier, told me, “The only way to know what's in your food is to make it yourself,” a sentiment that might as well be the motto of twenty-first-century food culture. The practice of going to painstaking lengths to know where your food comes from is known as “food vetting” among industry analysts, who consider it to be one of the decade's most important trends.

One female blogger in Austin, Texas, who has completely abandoned shopping at grocery stores in favor of DIY gardening and farmer's markets, succinctly describes the current atmosphere of food fear:

The last 21 months has seen many food recalls, a massive ground turkey recall, huge egg recalls, deadly listeria yielding melons, several beef recalls, a revelation that the apple juice in children's juice boxes contains unreasonable levels of arsenic, sourced from China and Argentina, and I don't even remember what else . . . I don't want to worry about those things. I don't want to wonder what's in my food, or where it came from.¹

A growing skepticism toward conventional medicine has led to an increasing reliance on home or alternative remedies—nearly 40 percent of American adults now use what the National Institutes of Health describes as “complementary and alternative medicine,” and numbers are significantly higher among women.² This skepticism leads to behaviors that range from benign (researching symptoms online, trying out

different traditional diets) to dangerous—the mother-led vaccine-refusal movement has led to a resurgence of near-vanquished childhood diseases in affluent, liberal areas like Boulder, Colorado, and Northern California. In these parts of the country, an ethos of homespun, traditional wisdom reigns. This is never so evident as in the growing popularity of home birth—rates of home births rose 20 percent between 2004 and 2008, with a 94 percent increase among white women.³

In a similar vein, distrust in the school system has led a growing number of progressive-minded mothers (as many as 99 percent of homeschool instructors are women) to take their children's educations into their own hands. The number of homeschooled American children jumped from 850,000 in 1999 to 1.1 million in 2003 to 1.5 million in 2007,⁴ and nonreligious “concern about the school environment” was the number one reason cited for choosing to homeschool,⁵ revealing how the movement has leapt from the religious right to the mainstream. Among women I've interviewed, common reasons for choosing homeschooling ranged from “schools suppress kids' natural creativity” to “I worry about what they're feeding them in the cafeteria.” These attitudes often go hand in hand with the increasingly popular theory of attachment parenting (which emphasizes co-sleeping, extended breast-feeding, and copious amounts of skin-to-skin contact) and the notion that day care is bad for children, an idea that holds increasing sway over American parents. Nearly three-quarters of Americans now disapprove of day care, a percentage that's higher than it was in the 1980s, famous as the era of bogus “day care Satanic sex cult” stories.

Though most of the phenomena I've just described are associated with a progressive, relatively affluent demographic, we're actually seeing similar things on the right side of the political spectrum as well. Conservative Americans' long-held suspicions of government are also beginning to manifest in a DIY culture that looks mighty similar to what you see in the liberal enclaves of Berkeley or Boulder. We're all familiar with the antigovernment rhetoric of the Tea Party, which took the 2010 midterm elections by storm with promises of church- and community-based solutions for large social ills. But we're also seeing a new breed of so-called crunchy cons—conservatives motivated by progressive notions of environmentalism and self-sufficiency, albeit with a religious or anti-Big Government gloss. Among religious Christian women, for example,

there's a growing interest in the natural parenting movement, whose ideologies of motherly instinct, rejection of day care, and 24/7 mother-child attachment appeal to conservative notions of femininity.

Across the political spectrum, nostalgia reigns. Over and over again we hear that the world used to be a safer, more trustworthy place. *Schools used to really teach kids, rather than herd them like sheep. Doctors didn't used to shoot babies full of so many unknown chemicals—the number of vaccines has risen from three to thirty-six! Our great-grandmothers used to know exactly where all the food they put on the table came from; now you can't even pronounce the ingredients on the back of a soup can.*

While this rising sense of distrust is certainly not limited to women, the resulting DIY culture does rest heavily on female shoulders. From the liberal Brooklyn mom concerned over BPA in her canned black beans to Sarah Palin's "mama grizzlies" defending their families from government intrusion, women are still very much considered the gatekeepers of family health and safety. When the government, schools, and the medical system aren't trusted, the responsibility is handed back to Mom.

ENVIRONMENTALISM HAS MOVED FROM THE PUBLIC SPHERE INTO THE HOME

A lot of my homemaker-y stuff—growing vegetables and cloth diapering—stems from my desire to do my part for the earth as much as anything else.

—Carla, 29, Northern California

Oil spills. Fracking. Contaminated groundwater. Rising seas. Global drought. From an environmental perspective, we're living in very frightening times indeed. But, despite years of activism, the possibility of the kind of legislation that might make a dent in the problem seems to recede further and further into the distance. Progressives elected Barack Obama with high hopes for increased energy standards and cleaner air and water policies. But his actual record has been tragically disappointing.

It's not surprising, then, that people are turning to their own homes to try to make a difference. In recent years, the environmentalist's mandate

of “Be the change you want to see in the world” has expanded far beyond carrying a canvas tote bag to Whole Foods. A significant minority of Americans are dedicating themselves to locavore diets, giving up driving in favor of bikes, purging their homes of nonorganic cleaners. A smaller but highly influential minority is going even further, unplugging refrigerators, growing all their own vegetables, downsizing their houses, or dedicating themselves to eco-friendly philosophies like voluntary simplicity or frugal living or neo-homesteading.

This kind of self-abnegation in the face of nature is as old as Thoreau. But never before has it been quite so mainstream—laundry is once again flapping on the line in suburban backyards; major corporations sponsor “bike to work” days. And never has it been so female led. The locus of environmentalism has moved from the public sphere to the domestic, where women—for better and for worse—still do most of the decision-making, controlling 93 percent of food purchases and at least 73 percent of overall household spending.⁶ The once-radical concept of “eco-feminism”—the idea that women are the natural protectors of Mother Earth—has gone mainstream, with “eco-chicks” and “green moms” using their “innate” nurturing capabilities to fight for the environment.

“Love your family, love the planet” is the tagline of EcoMom.com, one of many environmentalist “lifestyle activism” sites aimed at women. But it might as well be the motto of this new environmental movement as a whole: change happens at home, and it begins with our domestic choices.

THE PROLONGED RECESSION IS DRIVING US HOMEWARD

You know, maybe I don't need to be buying things from a store, maybe I can figure out how to make stuff without just being a consumer all the time.

—Sara, 29, South Dakota

People are realizing that they don't have to work to make money to buy certain things, they can just cut out the middle process. I can clean my own house, I can make a toy for my kid.

—Jason, 30, Northern California

Few of us are living high on the hog these days. The iron-gray clouds of recession, which settled over the nation in 2008, show no signs of dissipating. Unless your name is Kim Kardashian, you've probably had to tighten your belt. We're all pinching pennies, downsizing, making do.

The resurgence of old-fashioned domestic arts—the knitting, the preserving, the sewing your own clothes—is partially rooted in a recession-based ethos of frugality. Though baking your own bread may only save a few dollars a month, the domestic DIY movement provides a sense of control over a very out-of-control situation: we may not be able to cover our mortgages or keep our jobs, but we can streamline the grocery bill by using white vinegar instead of pricey cleaning gels. We can't control what's outside the home, but we can control what's inside.

Some of today's more extreme domestic philosophies, like voluntary simplicity or urban homesteading, are heavily influenced by economic factors as well. Though many people cite environmentalism or a desire for self-sufficiency as the main reason for choosing downscaled, home-centric lifestyles, economists point out that these lifestyles are much more popular in times of economic woe. In other words, someone who jettisons go-go city life for a rural farmstead after a layoff in the name of "a simpler life" (like many of the memoirists I mentioned before) may simply be rationalizing their decision to make the best of a bad economic situation. In the flush 1990s, they may have simply looked for another job. In the recession-plagued 2010s, they're being forced to make more dramatic lifestyle changes. Domesticity has become an "out" for the casualties of an exploded economy.

Women still control most of the domestic purse strings and do most of the domestic work, regardless of whether they work outside the home. So when it comes time to cut back on household spending, they tend to be in charge. Former Miami University English professor and domesticity expert Sherrie Inness describes the idealized image of the money-saving homemaker thusly: "Growing her own vegetables, saving heels of bread to turn into breadcrumbs, serving inexpensive meatless meals, and using leftovers rather than discarding them—anything to stretch money a little further."⁷

This is, in fact, a description of the idealized Depression-era housewife. But it could easily have been ripped from the pages of last month's *O, the Oprah Magazine* or *Real Simple*. The image of the thrifty, resourceful, self-

sufficient homemaker still carries a huge amount of cultural currency. And in our current recession economy, she's become a veritable heroine.

DISSATISFACTION WITH THE WORKPLACE

Second-wave feminism promised us that we'd be able to break through the glass ceiling. So then we all went to work and realized, "Oh, this sucks—I don't have enough parental leave, I can't have it all, there is no such thing as work-life balance."

—Melanie, 38, Austin, Texas

The working world of the twenty-first century demands more and more from employees while promising less. For professionals, the forty-hour workweek is more like a sixty-hour workweek, and 24/7 smartphone contact is a given. But pay is stagnant, benefits have been cut, and the specter of layoffs haunts every office corridor.

Amid this unhappy landscape, there's a sense that the way our parents' generation did things is no longer going to work. There's a new feeling of unwillingness among the youngest generation of workers to give over their entire lives to a cruel and fickle workforce. For women, who continue to carry the lion's share of domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, the "juggle" mentality is especially unappealing. We saw our mothers struggle with it, and we've been weaned on a decade of media stories about how it's impossible to "have it all." Our baby boomer mothers busted down the boardroom doors, leaving us to wonder, "Do I really want to be a CEO anyway?"

Being a CEO or making partner is not only less obtainable than ever, thanks to the economy, but it's also less appealing to a generation weaned on a "follow your passion" ethos. There's a sense among everyone, male and female, that we can no longer rely on jobs and careers to give us a personal identity or a sense of security. This sense is greatest among mothers, who have long felt particularly disenfranchised by the corporate world's antifamily policies.

While men with children are no more or less likely to be hired than men without, women with children face a dramatic "motherhood penalty"

of hiring discrimination and lowered salaries. While the recession has spawned a few family-friendly innovations, like job-sharing, these are few and far between. Corporations, looking to tighten their belts, rarely offer the kind of perks that seemed like the wave of the future in the boom-time 1990s—nap pods, on-site child care, company-sponsored yoga. And any hope we once had for federally funded child care is now laughable in the face of deficits and slash-and-burn spending cuts.

“If we had a boyfriend or a spouse who treated us this badly, most of us with healthy self-esteem would peg him as an abuser and dump him,” writes Shannon Hayes, author of *Radical Homemakers*, a book whose rallying cry of “Back to home and hearth!” was cited as a major inspiration for many of the women I’ve interviewed. To Hayes, the way the workforce treats women is so irredeemably awful that continuing to fight for more family-friendly, gender-equitable workplaces is tantamount to “a therapist working with a wife-beater to at least stop smacking her around on Sundays”—an unacceptable act of appeasement.

This attitude represents a shift in thinking about the workplace that can only be described as extreme. A decade ago, progressive women who left the workforce often couched their decision in somewhat apologetic terms, citing “personal choice” and “it was just what was right for our family.” Now an increasingly visible subculture of women sees quitting work as not just a personal choice but an explicitly political act.

“This is the new wave of feminism—women taking back the home,” said one twentysomething Chicago mom who quit her job as a sommelier to stay at home with her young son and work part-time as a birth doula. “This is my domain.”

I’ll talk about this all much more in chapter 7, where I look at women, New Domesticity, and the workforce.

THE RE-SKILLING MOVEMENT AND THE NOSTALGIA FOR HANDS-ON WORK

It is really fulfilling and sort of empowering, the idea of “Here’s dinner on the table—I grew it, I cooked it, I served it on napkins I sewed.”

—Carla, 29, Northern California

Up until a few generations ago, most women knew how to cook, clean, and sew. I grew up my whole life pushing buttons and flicking switches. I grew up with microwaves and the Internet and Saturday-morning cartoons.

—Jenna, 29, upstate New York

Our grandmothers saw convenience food as a liberation from kitchen drudgery and viewed cheap, mass-produced baby clothing as a relief for hands tired from sewing. Our mothers, busy working baby boomers, gave little thought to the traditional domestic arts—who had time?! Who wanted to be stuck in the kitchen? And, anyway, what was the point of making coq au vin when you had precooked rotisserie chicken and bags of spinach salad available at every suburban grocery store in America?

My generation increasingly sees things differently. We talk of “lost” crafts and “reclaiming” traditional women’s work like crocheting and quilting and baking homemade bread. We value the handmade, the from-scratch, the rustic, the personal. In an increasingly tech-oriented society, we’re hungry for hands-on work and hand-produced products.

For many of us, this interest in old-fashioned handwork is simply a hobby—doing needlepoint as a way to kick back after a hard week of dissertation writing, baking an elaborate cake for a friend’s birthday party. But some see themselves as part of what historians and sociologists are calling the “re-skilling movement,” which is aimed at restoring prestige to historically devalued traditional domestic arts and skills.

For modern young stay-at-home parents, the re-skilling movement is being embraced for its potential to make homemaking fulfilling in a way it never was for Betty Friedan’s desperate housewives. The rise of labor-saving technologies has made homemaking progressively less skilled throughout the twentieth century. As a result, it became less satisfying—skilled work is, after all, more fulfilling than unskilled work. Going to the fishmonger, examining the fish for freshness, and haggling over price is a more stimulating experience than chucking a frozen tilapia fillet in your cart at Trader Joe’s. Baking a cake from scratch and being praised for your skill gives you a sense of reward greater than mixing up a box of Funfetti cupcakes. We’re all familiar with the narrative of the Valium-

fogged 1950s housewife, adrift in her suburban home with nothing to do. Young women don't want that.

As one young, elitely educated California mom told me, if it weren't for her interest in what she calls "modern homemaking"—canning food, making handmade baby clothes—she "would probably end up pursuing a career, because [she] would be bored."

STANDARDS OF IDEAL PARENTHOOD HAVE GROWN EVER HIGHER

I'm very into natural parenting and that whole scene—it has sort of taken over my life!

—Gina, 27, Chicago

I was really obsessive about doing everything right. I put so much expectation on it . . . When you've approached your own life as a series of projects—school and work and so forth—parenting becomes one more.

—JJ, 32, Los Angeles

As I'll examine at length in chapter 6, ideals of what constitutes "good" parenthood seem to rise higher and higher with each passing year. We've seen a recent growth in the kind of parenting philosophies that necessitate a deep commitment to domesticity, whether that commitment means spending leisure time making homemade baby food or dropping out of the workforce entirely. The premiere example, the oft-discussed "attachment parenting" method, introduced to the mainstream by William Sears's 2001 *The Attachment Parenting Book*, has been gaining in popularity over the past decade. The method, and others like it, emphasizes extreme responsiveness to babies' cues—nursing on demand, not allowing babies to "cry it out"—and near-constant skin-to-skin contact, such as "babywearing" (carrying children in cloth slings) and co-sleeping. Other time-consuming practices, from child-led weaning to cloth diapering to homeschooling, are also on the rise. Many of these

philosophies and practices are, as I mentioned before, rooted in a distrust of current institutions (public schools, hospitals, day cares) combined with a twenty-first-century veneration for all things “natural” and a healthy dash of today’s libertarian spirit.

There’s an element of backlash against our baby boomer parents here too—I spoke with many young parents who lamented not having enough quality time with their own busy working parents. “I was kind of a latchkey kid, and that definitely influenced my decision to stay home,” said one thirtysomething mother, in a common refrain. Young people today are measurably more family focused than their parents were. Surveys show that Gen X and Gen Y rate themselves as “family-centric” in significantly higher numbers than baby boomers, and that young people are more likely than older people to describe childlessness as “bad for society.”

This new parenthood culture is deeply intertwined with some of the factors I’ve already discussed. Parents concerned about food safety are more likely to make their own baby food or grow their own vegetables. Parents worried about the environment are more likely to choose cloth diapering. And women who are unhappy in the workplace may feel more drawn to intensive parenting methods that give them a reason to stay home. The romanticization of family life is a natural response to a scary, unpredictable outside world.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF EMBRACING DOMESTICITY?

It’s easy to be positive about New Domesticity. After all, who doesn’t value a less money-obsessed, more sustainable, more family-centric culture? On the right side of the political spectrum, people see New Domesticity as a vindicating return to tradition, a sign that feminism has failed and young women are seeing the light. On the left side, it’s viewed as a happy outcome of postfeminism—women can now choose to enjoy domesticity without shame or feeling like they’ve let the sisterhood down. Many progressives point out, quite rightly, that some aspects of domesticity are becoming increasingly popular with men as well.

But the rise of New Domesticity raises some difficult questions. What will happen as we abandon society-wide solutions for problems like

climate change, food safety, and affordable child care in favor of a DIY approach? Does the burden of “do it yourself” fall harder on women than men? Does this new romanticization of family and motherhood put undue pressures on women, and does it disenfranchise men? Does our dismissal of the “women can have it all” notion bode ill for workplace equality?

These are questions I’ll be looking at in greater depth in coming chapters. But to start off, let’s look at some statistics on the state of women today, statistics that suggest that we’re still living (in the words of writer Peggy Orenstein) in a “half-changed world” when it comes to gender and class equality.

Women still do the vast majority of the housework in America. “Despite the perception that ‘Mr. Mom’ is on the rise, our research shows that traditional gender roles still exist among married and cohabiting parents. Mothers in those relationships assume the bulk of household and child-care responsibilities regardless of whether they work or not,” reports *Advertising Age*, summarizing a lengthy 2009 report on the new female consumer.

According to the National Survey of Families and Households, among heterosexual American couples, women do an average of thirty-one hours of housework a week, while men do fourteen.⁸ Among families where the man is the sole breadwinner (only about 20 percent of all families), the ratio, unsurprisingly, skews even further. But even among dual-earner couples, women still work the infamous “second shift,” doing an average of twenty-eight hours of housework a week compared with men’s sixteen hours.⁹ Working women spend eleven hours a week on child care, while working men spend three, a ratio that has surprisingly not shifted all that much since the 1930s.¹⁰ In the kitchen, women cook some 78 percent of all home dinners, spend nearly three times as many hours on food-related tasks as men, and make 93 percent of the food purchases. Overall trends, however, suggest we’re headed, slowly, toward a more egalitarian gender divide at home—young men tend to do far more housework and child care than their fathers did. While stay-at-home fathers are a tiny minority of stay-at-home parents (less than 3 percent of all stay-at-home parents are dads),¹¹ anecdotal evidence suggests their numbers may be rising, and hard evidence shows that young dads today spend much more time with their kids than a generation ago.

Despite huge amounts of progress over the decades, there are still major issues when it comes to women and the workplace. Statistics show that women's labor-force participation began to level off in the late 1990s and has remained stalled at 61 percent ever since. In many male-heavy fields like finance and computer science, women's once-burgeoning participation has taken a dramatic plunge. "Women are fading from the U.S. finance industry," reports *The Wall Street Journal*, noting that the number of women between the ages of twenty and thirty-five working in finance has dropped 16.5 percent over the past decade, while the number of men in that age range grew by 7.3 percent.¹² "I think in recent years the advances made by women in the 1990s have reversed," said Elaine La Roche, a former Morgan Stanley executive, in the *New York Times*.¹³ The number of women in computing-related careers—one of the twenty-first century's biggest job-growth areas—has fallen steadily since the early 2000s; women leave computing at twice the rate of their male peers (even before they become mothers) and represent only 9 percent of IT management positions.¹⁴ In politics, women hold 23.4 percent of available statewide elective executive positions, down from 27.6 percent twelve years ago. The situation's so distressing to many female politicians that New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand recently launched a campaign called Off the Sidelines to help motivate what she sees as young women's "stalled" political progress.

Human resources departments wring their hands over the "leaky pipeline"—women start strong at the beginning of their careers, but few make it to the highest levels of most industries. Women still represent fewer than 20 percent of law partners, 6 percent of CEOs and other high-level executives (and only 4.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs), 12 percent of state governors, and 17 percent of U.S. senators. More than 90 percent of corporate boards have two or fewer women, while in Silicon Valley, until 2012, none of the most buzzed-about new companies—Facebook, Twitter, Zynga, Groupon, Foursquare—had a single female board member.¹⁵

Women working full-time still earn less money than men—77 cents to every male dollar¹⁶—and are more likely than men to live in poverty, especially during their childbearing years (and again in old age). While women are participating in higher education at higher rates than men now, they need to—a woman needs a PhD to earn as much as a man with a BA. In heterosexual households where both partners work,

working wives contributed only 29 percent of household income in 2008, a number that has changed little since the 1980s. And though the vast majority of young women say they value financial independence, women are still far less likely than men to view careers as “very important”—36 percent versus 57 percent.¹⁷

Despite these statistics, only about half of young women aged eighteen to twenty-nine see a need for social change to ensure gender equality (older women think differently—70 percent call for social change). Young women tend to feel that the work of feminism is largely done, leaving decisions about career and domesticity a depoliticized matter of “personal choice.” As one woman, an educated stay-at-home homeschooling mom in Boulder, told me, “If I was living in the seventies, I would totally have been out burning my bra too—everything is about timing.”

But this attitude has come under intense fire from some prominent middle-aged female thinkers lately, who warn darkly of the perils of ignoring the past, the dangers of thinking it’s okay to take the mommy track or rely on your husband’s income to launch your “fulfilling” craft business. Legal scholar Linda Hirshman blasted women for opting out or taking “soft,” lower-earning paths in her 2006 manifesto, *Get to Work*. Erica Jong made headlines in 2010 and 2011 for her screeds on what she sees as a prudish, domesticity-obsessed generation of young women (a generation that includes Jong’s own daughter, a thirty-two-year-old stay-at-home mother of three). Famed French intellectual Elisabeth Badinter recently made international waves by charging that the current ideals of “green,” “natural” motherhood—the extended breast-feeding, the babywearing—are in fact a new form of oppression of women. Leslie Bennetts, former *Newsweek* writer and author of the anti-opt-out manifesto *The Feminine Mistake*, worries that young women are choosing domestic paths that may diminish their ability to earn an independent living: “There are aspects of the New Domesticity that are lovely, but it is no substitute for being able to support your family,” she told me.

In the following chapters, I’ll look at how the re-embrace of domesticity squares with long-held goals of gender equality, female economic independence, and the pursuit of work-life balance and meaningful happy lives, for women and men. Where does this New Domesticity lead us?